

SCIENCE MEDIA CENTRE - WRITTEN EVIDENCE (FDO0025)

1. What is the Science Media Centre?

The [Science Media Centre](#) (SMC) is an independent press office for science, set up in 2002 in the wake of big media stories in the 1990s that lacked input from qualified expert scientists, such as the MMR and autism health scare, 'Frankenfoods' (GM crops), BSE and CJD, and animal research. The SMC has its roots in the influential House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee third report on Science and Society, which wanted to renew public trust in science. The Science Media Centre is an independent charity and company limited by guarantee (Company Registration No. 07560997, England & Wales; Charity Registration No. 1140827).

2. What does the SMC do?

The aim of the SMC is to try to ensure media coverage of science, health and environment stories is accurate, measured and evidence based. The SMC believes that scientists can have a huge impact on the way the media covers science, by engaging more quickly and more effectively with the stories that are influencing public debate. The SMC's priorities are: making it easier for news journalists to access the best science and scientists when science hits the headlines; and facilitating scientists to engage with the media – especially on the kinds of science stories that are contested or could mislead the public.

3. Independence

The independence of the SMC is key. It explains why the SMC is so widely trusted by journalists and used by all UK news organisations. The SMC does not have any specific agenda other than to promote the reporting of evidence-based science. A central principle of the SMC's funding model is the clear separation between funding and editorial decisions on its work – all decisions about which stories the SMC works on are made entirely by its staff and in line with its charitable objectives. The SMC's editorial decisions are guided by a [Board of Trustees and an Advisory Group](#).

4. **Funding**

The SMC seeks charitable donations from a wide variety of organisations with an interest in accurate media reporting of science, and is currently funded by around 110 organisations, including universities, science publishers, research charities, science funders, learned bodies, government departments, science-based companies, and media organisations. The SMC is independent from its funders who do not gain influence over the SMC's work in return for their financial support – the funding is not sponsorship or membership or payment for a service or anything that comes with conditions, and it is made clear to funders that they get no influence over editorial decisions in return for a donation. To further protect the SMC from any undue influence donations from any one institution are capped at 5% of prior year income (the SMC's Trustees and Advisory Group have agreed on two exceptions to the 5% upper limit: the Wellcome Trust and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI); UKRI's contribution is over the 5% cap as this represents the consolidated amounts from several Research Councils which is now paid via the umbrella organisation set up in 2019). Further details about the SMC's funding can be seen [here](#). In the financial year April 2022 – March 2023, four funders out of 106 were food companies or trade bodies.

5. **Reason for submitting evidence**

The SMC has no expertise in food, diet or obesity research. The SMC's press officers have science backgrounds but are not active researchers. But the SMC's job is to be concerned with the public understanding of science, particularly those that relate to health; and the SMC does have expertise in how the UK national news media covers science. The SMC believes there is a huge public interest in the best evidence and the best scientific experts being available to the public and to journalists. The news media is still a major and influential [source of information](#), including [science information](#), for the wider public and if people are going to change their behaviour based on information in the media the SMC would like to ensure that that information is as accurate as possible and is informed by experts and with reference to robust scientific evidence. The SMC believes the public can cope with nuance and uncertainty, and favours honesty about the limitations of evidence over 'messaging'. The SMC understands that everyone has an opinion on food and has the right to take part in the public debate, but wants to ensure research scientists – as those with the most expertise and who know where the weight of evidence lies – are fully involved in the debate.

6. Conflicts of interest among scientists

The SMC agrees that transparency about conflicts of interest among scientists are important, and that journalists and others should scrutinise these interests. The SMC asks scientists to declare all relevant interests in all its work (whether that is written comments from scientists about new research, or scientists sitting on press briefing panels), and its policy on declaring interests can be seen [here](#). The SMC has no expertise in the funding of science but understands from contacts in universities and research funders that across various disciplines within science (e.g. pharmaceuticals, biotech, energy, agritech, food etc.) scientists often have contact or work in some way with companies, whether that be collaborating on research, receiving industry funding for research, or advising companies on science. The SMC understands that the big science funders in the UK – e.g. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – encourage and sometimes even request that scientists applying for grants from them also seek funding from relevant companies (see a relevant [blog](#) published by UKRI). The SMC believes these funders need to communicate that to the public and media and explain the reasons for it and whether firewalls exist to ensure the research and findings are not influenced by the companies involved.

7. Public trust in science and scientists

All scientists and science should be open to scrutiny. However the public needs to hear good quality evidence from the very best scientists, particularly when topics become controversial and polarised (such as on ultra-processed food (UPF)). If scientists or scientific studies are dismissed automatically because of actual or perceived conflicts of interest there is a risk the public will not get a measured view of where the weight of evidence lies and they may be deprived of some of the best expertise and best evidence. The SMC has a role in encouraging and supporting the best scientists to engage with the media and to enter the fray when their area of expertise hits the headlines. The SMC is concerned that if scientists are demonised because of openly-declared conflicts of interest, scientists with similar links may be discouraged from engaging and speaking about their research. Many senior scientists will have multiple roles and several sources of funding which may include industry funding. It is not in the public interest to dismiss this group of experts. The SMC believes that all science, however it is funded, should be critiqued and scrutinised – science already has several mechanisms to assess the quality of studies, including peer review. Indeed one of the main outputs of the SMC is 'Roundups' of written comments from third-party expert scientists critiquing new scientific studies, where they are

encouraged to comment on the robustness, strengths and limitations of the studies. Scientists can and do rightly criticise poor quality research, whoever its authors and whatever its funding source. The SMC believes that the public interest lies in scientific evidence being judged on its quality.

8. **Summary**

The SMC would like media coverage and public debate around food, diet and obesity – including UPF – to be as informed, accurate, measured and evidence-based as possible. The SMC believes this will only happen if the best scientists are encouraged to take part in this debate and if scientific evidence is judged on merit. Those commentators who are advocating that society should exclude good quality science and scientists because of standard links to industry risk harming the public interest.

9. **Recommendations**

The Science Media Centre recommends that:

- Scientists and scientific organisations should be open and transparent about sources of funding and should declare any potential conflicts of interest.
- People who are critical of industry-academic links should consider the public interest when advocating for the media and public to exclude evidence and expertise from scientists with any links to industry.
- The organisations who champion links between science and industry and who encourage scientists to work more closely with companies should make their case in the news media more often. In particular bodies like the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), UKRI, and university vice chancellors etc. These organisations should especially enter the media fray when individual scientists are being pilloried in the press for any such links. It's not okay that the bodies that have pressed and incentivised scientists to collaborate with industry fail to publicly defend these links when academics are under attack.

Submission written by Fiona Lethbridge on behalf of the Science Media Centre

Declaration of interests:

Fiona Lethbridge: No personal conflicts of interest.

Science Media Centre: Details of the SMC's funding model, and the list of funders for the 2022-2023 financial year, are available [here](#). In the financial year April 2022 – March 2023, four funders out of 106 were food companies or trade bodies.

References:

Science Media Centre: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/>

SMC's governance: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/about-us/governance/>

SMC's funding: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/about-us/funding/>

SMC's declarations of interest policy:
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<https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/PDF-summary-report.pdf>

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